

# Freedom-in-Education Newsletter

November 2004

*Welcome to the November issue of the Freedom in Education Newsletter.*

*This month's article is about discipline. My father, Gareth Lewis, speaks from personal experience on this subject, from the days when he taught in schools in England. Over the years of being home educated I have sometimes heard the question 'what do you do about discipline?' being posed to my parents. It has always made me smile because, as a matter of fact, we have never done anything about discipline. It was never necessary because my brother and sister and I were only doing what we wanted to be doing, and therefore didn't need to be disciplined. There was no need for a school bell, because the desire to begin lessons came from us.*

*My father would sometimes take this to an extreme, I thought, by not reminding us it was time for lessons when me and my brother and sister had forgotten and were playing elsewhere! When we discovered him working away by himself, doing lessons without us, we were quite shocked and I could never understand why he hadn't called us in, when we obviously wanted to do lessons, but had just forgotten.*

*Having spent a little time in school since, and given some thought to the matter, I can now understand why he did this. At school, no matter how immersed a child is in their game in the playground, when the bell rings they have to go indoors. Nobody realises their game was probably more important to them, definitely more educational, and certainly more enjoyable, than anything they would go into the classroom to learn about. Nobody is prepared to treat the child with respect, and nobody considers that if the school lessons were worth attending the child would voluntarily give up their game and go indoors of their own accord. This article, I think, shows up the idea of discipline for what it really is.*

*Thank you to everyone who has sent in letters and links this month. If you would like to send a comment, site-suggestion, favourite quote, or news about an upcoming event to be included in next month's newsletter, please [contact](#) me.*

*The subject of the December Newsletter's article is [A Father's Role in Education](#).*

*With best wishes for November,*

Wendy

## Discipline

*Do children need to be disciplined or do they know what is best for themselves?*

There are two distinct views about the relationship between education and discipline. On the one hand there are those who believe that without discipline there can be no education, while on the other hand there is the view that no one has the right to enforce discipline on anyone else.

### **The Habit of Enforcing Discipline**

My personal approach to the issue has been shaped by experience; I started teaching when I was in my twenties and initially, it did not occur to me that I should try to adopt an approach any different from that of the teachers who had taught me when I was at school. I expected pupils to be polite, to defer to my decisions and to do what they were told. When this didn't happen, I found myself in difficulties and the issue of discipline soon started to eclipse all the other aspects of my work. My colleagues explained that children do not automatically do what teachers tell them to do, and even some of the pupils tried to suggest where I was going wrong. The general consensus seemed to be that in the world of teaching you have to start 'tough' and that you can only show the kinder side of your nature later on – once the children have learnt to 'respect' you.

I had an opportunity to put this approach into practice when I was transferred to an annexe of the school reserved for the new intake. For a few months I adopted all the techniques that had been suggested to me – such as insisting that children line up in an orderly way before entering the room, insisting that children stand when I entered the room, not allowing children to speak or ask questions unless they raised their hands, making an example of children who stepped out of line, etc. – and doing it all while looking stern and foreboding – and sure enough things worked well. For the first time, I had quiet, orderly lessons just like the other teachers and the pupils were obedient to my commands; the problem was that I did not like myself for behaving in this way, and after a few months I tried the experiment of relaxing the tough image, and being more considerate of the children's feelings. In a matter of weeks my lessons had once more descended into chaos, with everyone talking at the same time, arguments breaking out, and people not taking any notice of what I was saying.

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"Once a teacher embarks on a path of maintaining order in their classroom through techniques of intimidation, they are condemning themselves to a life-long career of bullying children."

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It became clear to me that it was not true that a 'good disciplinarian' could afford to relax their standards as and when they chose. Rather, it became apparent that once a teacher embarks on a path of maintaining order in their classroom through techniques of intimidation, they are in fact condemning themselves to a life-long career of bullying children.

Consequently, I left the teaching profession and did not return to it until several years later, when I had a chance to teach mathematics and science at a Steiner school.

I did not know how I was going to approach the task, but I was determined to do it differently from before. I think that one of the big differences between this, my second venture into teaching, and my first, was that I had become a parent in the interim. Even though the pupils that I was teaching were fifteen years old, while my own children were much younger, I found myself treating my class in the same way as I treated my own children and this worked remarkably well.

I discovered that if you don't set out with a particular agenda in mind, but, instead, try to understand the real needs of the children that you are teaching, then discipline ceases to be an issue.

For me this was a revolutionary discovery and it altered my whole attitude to teaching and education.

### What is Discipline?

When one stops to consider what discipline is really all about, one realises that it involves making someone do something that they don't want to do.

In our society, apart from schools, the only places in which discipline is overtly enforced is within such institutions as the police force, the armed forces, and the prison service. People join the police and the armed forces knowing that they will be called upon to do things that they do not want to do, and they make a conscious decision to accept a code of discipline which will ensure that they obey orders in times of crisis. In the case of prisons, prisoners are considered to have lost their right to be treated according to the normal rules of society, and therefore have to accept rules enforced by prison staff.

It is not clear why children in school should be judged as being another category requiring discipline: they have neither made a conscious decision to go to school, nor have they committed any transgression which might justify harsh treatment.

Up until the time that they go to school, children are not really subject to discipline. Parents and children have to find a way of getting on with each other at home which usually involves a measure of compromise on both sides. Children are by no means the junior partner in this situation, and have a large say over what happens in their daily lives.

All this changes when a child goes to school; suddenly it is the teacher who makes almost all the decisions. At first this does not look too oppressive when viewed from the outside: children in reception classes appear to be playing and doing much the same things as they would be doing at home, but the difference is that they are now doing it according to someone else's plan – and techniques of enforcing discipline are already being employed even at this stage. The regime may appear to be benign but it still causes enormous stress for many children, leading to tears, sleeplessness, bed-wetting, headaches, and constant colds and minor ailments. In any normal circumstances parents would rush to protect their children from a situation that is causing them so much distress, but because the idea is prevalent that discipline is good for children, parents ignore their feelings and continue sending their children to school.

As the years go by, school settles into a routine of sitting at desks, writing in exercise books, preparing for tests, etc.

Discipline is now more apparent; children are kept to a routine by a combination of threats and incentives, on the one hand being warned of the dire consequences that result from leaving school with no qualifications, and on the other, being given hints of the wonderful future awaiting children who do what they are told and pass all their exams.

In the midst of all this, it is not surprising that children forget that there was once a time when they made their own decisions about what they did from one day to the next.

### **Do Adults Always Know Best?**

The theory underpinning this approach is that adults know best. Having made this assumption, people in charge of schools feel justified deciding what children should learn, what examinations they should sit, what qualifications they should be awarded, etc. When things go wrong, it does not occur to them that perhaps it is they who are at fault; it is assumed that the fault lies with the children, who are then given more 'help' to learn the things that people have decided that they should learn, or who are punished for not cooperating fully with the regime that schools are providing for them.

#### **New to the Jamboree website:**

#### **Apple Tart**

This is a classic French recipe for an apple tart, which is not at all difficult to make. It is like the ones which can be bought in any French pâtisserie but it tastes twice as good when home made!



## The Art of Teaching Without Discipline

When one takes an objective look at the idea of making children learn specific things at specific times, it

becomes clear that in terms of education, it is a complete waste of time.

Almost everyone has been to school, and therefore everyone has first-hand experience of what happened when they were made to learn something; it was repeated on the day of the test – without any real understanding – quickly forgotten, and vaguely disliked ever afterwards. In this way schools have managed to alienate people from whole branches of learning, ranging from foreign languages, to the works of Shakespeare, and from mathematics to science.

What really happens when people go to school is that the process of self-education which has been proceeding at break-neck speed from the moment a child is born, suddenly grinds to a halt.

Children learn all the most important lessons of life before they even start school: they learn how to socialise within a family, how to move around, how to walk, how to talk, they learn about colours, about how to count, they develop their manual dexterity, and learn countless things about the world around them. Any parent knows that it is the child themselves who is in charge of this learning process; parents and other family members can do a lot to help a young child, but different children learn things at different times, and there is nothing that anyone can do to make a child learn to walk or talk, except simply give them encouragement.

Very few people have ever been foolish enough to believe that it would be possible to devise a curriculum for babies and toddlers – age six months, crawl: age 1, walk: age 1½, say simple words, etc. – and then to enforce it through a programme of instruction. It is tacitly accepted that for these most difficult of all lessons, the child has to be allowed to set their own timetable, to work at their own pace, and to approach the task in their own way.

The aptitude that children show for learning in this way is such that it ought to allay any fears that parents might have for their future. But, alas, parents then fall prey to the argument that children need specialist teachers for specialist subjects.

Schools thrive on the idea that there is something special about academic activities such as reading and writing, mathematics and science, which requires them to be taught by qualified teachers. Once this has been conceded it is only a short step to saying that children need discipline so that the specialist teachers can get on with their job – suddenly the teacher becomes more important than the child.

Experience gained by home-educating families shows that this whole way of looking at education is based solely on fear and ignorance. Home-educated children spend most of their time learning things and reading things that their parents know nothing about, and home-educating parents are often inspired by their children to learn about things that they haven't thought about since they were at school.

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**Also new to the Jamboree website:**

**Advent Calendar**

A particularly fun thing for you or your child to do at this time of year is to make an advent calendar. It can be made without another member of the family knowing, and left by their bedside, to be found as a surprise on the first of December!

Also check out the inspiring life of Diogenes the Cynic, and the cartoon of the Aesop's fable, the Wind and the Sun.

[www.jamboree.freedom-in-education.co.uk](http://www.jamboree.freedom-in-education.co.uk)

There is no reason why the process of a child learning at their own pace and in their own way should ever be stopped. It can be allowed to evolve from learning how to talk, to learning through creative play, to picking up useful skills, to exploring the world of books, and on to whatever area captures their interest.

The role of the adult in this process remains more or less the same throughout: you don't have to stop being a caring, interested human being, and you never have to assume the guise of being an expert on any subject.

The real art of being a teacher (whether you are teaching your own children or someone else's) involves having time to listen to what children say, understanding their difficulties, providing them

with encouragement, helping them to find things that they need, and making sure that you are good company.

**Self Discipline is the Only Real Discipline**

When children are allowed to retain control of their own education, they also learn about real discipline. They discover that if they want to get things done they have to work at them, and that if they want to understand things they have to think about what they are doing. In the process they develop the self-discipline which is essential for success in life.

The discipline that is enforced in schools has the opposite effect; children resent being told what to do, and most of their time and energy is spent on finding ways of cheating the system.

Understandably, they carry these attitudes into higher education and into the workplace – giving rise to all the complaints that people have about school leavers.

Far from being a point in favour of school, discipline should be regarded as one of the primary reasons for not sending a child to school.

Whatever good a teacher may be able to do is completely negated if it is done in such a way as to deprive a child of their freedom of choice and sense of being in control of their daily life. For many people, the most subtle, long-lasting, and pernicious legacy that they carry from their schooldays is the belief that their only responsibility in life is to do what they are told.

Such people are often pained and confused when they see the state of modern society and, to them, the solution to every problem is to impose more discipline on young people. The real way forward, however, is to treat every child with more respect and

to ensure that their wishes and requirements are never overridden by other people's ideas of what is best for them.

*Gareth Lewis*

## Letters

Dear Lewis family,

I home schooled my daughters when we were living in Bermuda, where they were born and lived up until 2002, when we moved back to the UK. I continued to homeschool until the Spring of that yr and planned to keep my youngest at home for another year (she was 7 then) and send my eldest, then 9, to the local Primary school in order to adjust to regular school before starting Secondary. However, I was advised to send both starting in that last summer term .

While K. was about a yr ahead of her peers academically, apart from a few lapses from the different curriculums (yes, there is a vast supply and variety of curriculums to choose from in the States, we started with 'Oak Meadow', from a Canadian friend's advice which is based on the Rudolf Steiner/Waldorf method, and loved it for the early yrs, then supplemented it with various others for specific topics) versus the National Curriculum which I grow to dislike each year, she was soon picked out as being very different and by the second term, her last yr in Primary, bullying began, from her accent to her religion they found things to tease her about. Ironically this is a Church of England aided school and being only one of 2 Christians in her class made her and our family the subject of ridicule.

The shock to find my beloved country so changed after 20 yrs away, so secular, so anti family unity & values was almost too much to bear but we were committed financially now to stay here and we've struggled on staying close to each other for strength. I still felt that the UK's education system, while completely wrong for the Primary years ( even European countries see the benefit and wisdom of little academic schooling until after 7 allowing reading, for instance, to happen naturally soon after that age, as happened with both of my girls who read fluently and effortlessly compared to many of their peers who are forced too young and often grow to hate it or continue to struggle for many yrs after) and I continue to vent my disgust via email to the PM (!) I still thought that I could not come close to substituting a secondary education. There is much of what K 'learns' at school that we have already covered or could do better together at home, ie science , history , and Home Economics, ( or should I say D&T ) ,

It is the maths particularly that has changed so much and involves pc use where SHE tries to teach me and I still haven't a clue (nor inclination I'm afraid) this is where I'm too scared to take over and not convinced that she would like to return to homeschool now she is coming under the spell of her preteen classmates, the latter of which scares me the most!

Happily since moving to Sec school the bullying is almost nil but I'm always on the look out of it becoming a problem again so we can stop it before it makes her life miserable again. Finding your website gave me hope and encouragement that if things did deteriorate too much here was a haven of information, like minded families and philosophy to turn to and I shall encourage both daughters to read the Jamboree and perhaps they'll feel that they are not alone in their thinking and be assured that they don't have to follow the pack to be cool. Who knows, maybe they'll be the ones making the decision for their future education, it would certainly take the pressure off me!

Thanks for being there.

K. M. Petty

FREE

A breeze is free

A dandelion seed is also

As a dandelion seed floats on a breeze

I am out huddled in my coat.

Esme (8)

## Upcoming Event

### **CAMBRIDGE HOME EDUCATION RESOURCES DAY**

*hosted by Cambridge Home Educating Families*

**DATE:** SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 13th

**TIME:** 10 a.m. - 3 p.m.

**LOCATION:** Queen Edith Chapel, Wulfstan Way, Cambridge

#### **HIGHLIGHTS:**

- Resources exhibited by **Halfmoon Books** ([www.halfmoonbooks.net](http://www.halfmoonbooks.net)), **Ichthus Resources** ([www.ichthusresources.co.uk](http://www.ichthusresources.co.uk)), and other distributors of home education resources.
- Used curriculum and book sale. (If you have materials you would like to sell, just label and drop off at the used book table).
- Activity room for small children so parents can browse the books, plus an outdoor play field if the weather is agreeable.
- Coffee/tea/snacks available.
- Onsite parking.

For more information, feel free to contact **Kim Wheeler** at [wheeler@emeraldis.com](mailto:wheeler@emeraldis.com) or 01223-569891 .

## Quote of the Month

"I am beginning to suspect all elaborate systems of education. They seem to me to be built up on the supposition that every child is a kind of idiot who must be taught to think. Whereas if the child is left to himself, he will think more and better, if less showily. Let him go and come freely, let him touch real things and combine his impressions for himself, instead of sitting indoors at a little round table, while a sweet-voiced teacher suggests that he builds a stone wall with his wooden blocks, or plant straw trees in bead flower-pots. Such teaching fills the mind with artificial associations that must be got rid of, before the child can develop independent ideas out of actual experiences."

-Anne Sullivan, tutor to Helen Keller

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